



United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Folsom Field Office
63 Natoma Street
Folsom, CA 95630
www.blm.gov/ca/folsom



Arrastraville Fuel Break (CA-180-08-68) Decision Record October 2008

1.0 Introduction and Background

The Bureau of Land Management's Folsom Field Office (BLM) proposes to build a fuel break on BLM-administered land. Based on information in the EA, the project record, and recommendations from my staff, the following constitutes my decision.

2.0 Decision

2.1 Alternatives Considered but not Selected

The no action alternative was considered but not selected. Under this alternative, the fuel break would not be built. There would be no impacts on the environment. However, BLM would miss an opportunity to address its fire management goals, objectives, and strategies laid out in the Sierra Resource Management Plan and the Folsom Field Office Fire Management Plan.

2.2 Decision and Rationale

Based on information in the EA, the project record, and recommendations my staff, I have decided to implement the proposed action as described in the EA. There are no restrictions on the time of implementation. BLM will build a fuel break, as proposed in the EA, on BLM-administered land. The fuel break is needed to help protect lives and property.

3.0 Consultation and Coordination

No special status animal or plant species (or their habitats) will be affected by the project; therefore, consultation with US Fish and Wildlife Service was unnecessary.

4.0 Public Involvement

The EA was posted on the BLM Folsom Field Office internet website for a formal 15-day public comment period in August 2008. No comments were received.

5.0 Plan Consistency

Based on information in the EA, the project record, and recommendations from my staff, I conclude that this decision is consistent with the fire management goals, objectives, and strategies laid out in the Sierra Resource Management Plan and the Folsom Field Office Fire Management Plan. The decision is also in compliance with the Endangered Species Act; Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act; and other applicable environmental laws, regulations, and policies.

6.0 Administrative Remedies

Administrative remedies may be available to those who believe they will be adversely affected by this decision. Appeals may be made to the Office of Hearings and Appeals, Office of the Secretary, U.S. Department of Interior, Board of Land Appeals (Board) in strict compliance with the regulations in 43 CFR Part 4. Notices of appeal must be filed in this office within 30 days after publication of this decision. If a notice of appeal does not include a statement of reasons, such statement must be filed with this office and the Board within 30 days after the notice of appeal is filed. The notice of appeal and any statement of reasons, written arguments, or briefs must also be served upon the Regional Solicitor, Pacific Southwest Region, U.S. Department of Interior, 2800 Cottage Way, E-1712, Sacramento, CA 95825.

The effective date of this decision (and the date initiating the appeal period) will be the date the notice of this decision is posted on the BLM Folsom Field Office internet website.



William S. Haigh
Field Manager, Folsom Field Office



Date



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Darby Knob fuel break (CA-180-08-69) Finding of No Significant Impact October 2008

It is my determination that this decision will not result in significant impacts to the quality of the human environment. Anticipated impacts are within the range of impacts addressed in the Sierra Resource Management Plan/Final Environmental Impact Statement. The proposed action does not constitute a major federal action having a significant effect on the human environment; therefore, an environmental impact statement is not necessary and will not be prepared. This conclusion is based on my consideration of CEQ's following criteria for significance (40 CFR §1508.27), regarding the context and intensity of the impacts described in the EA, and based on my understanding of the project:

- 1) *Impacts can be both beneficial and adverse and a significant effect may exist regardless of the perceived balance of effects.* Potential impacts include vegetation removal, soil disturbance, and temporary noise and dust due to cutting and masticating fuels. However, none of these impacts would be significant at the local level or cumulatively because of the small scale of the project. Visual resources may be impacted but these impacts are in line with management objectives and are not considered significant.
- 2) *The degree of the impact on public health or safety.* No aspects of the project have been identified as having the potential to significantly and adversely impact public health or safety. In fact, the project is designed to help firefighters fight wildfire; therefore protecting public health and safety.
- 3) *Unique characteristics of the geographic area.* The project area does not have any unique characteristics. Soil, vegetation, wildlife, and cultural resources are all typical for the area.
- 4) *The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial effects.* No anticipated effects have been identified that are scientifically controversial. As a factor for determining within the meaning of 40 C.F.R. § 1508.27(b)(4) whether or not to prepare a detailed environmental impact statement, "controversy" is not equated with "the existence of opposition to a use." *Northwest Environmental Defense Center v. Bonneville Power Administration*, 117 F.3d 1520, 1536 (9th Cir. 1997). "The term 'highly controversial' refers to instances in which 'a substantial dispute exists as to the size, nature, or effect of the major federal action rather than the mere existence of opposition to a use.'" *Hells Canyon Preservation Council v. Jacoby*, 9 F.Supp.2d 1216, 1242 (D. Or. 1998).
- 5) *The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are likely to be highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.* The analysis does not show that this action would involve any unique or unknown risks.

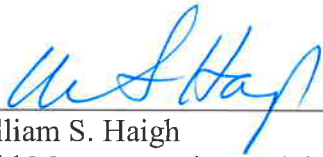
6) *The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.* Fuel break construction and maintenance is not precedent setting.

7) *Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.* No significant cumulative impacts have been identified. The project is consistent with the actions and impacts anticipated in the Sierra Resource Management Plan and its associated environmental impact statement.

8) *The degree to which the action may adversely affect National Historic Register listed or eligible to be listed sites or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural or historical resources.* The project would not affect cultural resources listed on or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. One cultural resource was identified within the project area. It is undetermined whether the resource is eligible for the National Register. It would be flagged for avoidance.

9) *The degree to which the action may adversely affect ESA listed species or critical habitat.* No ESA listed species (or their habitat) will be affected by the environment.

10) *Whether the action threatens a violation of environmental protection law or requirements.* There is no indication that this decision will result in actions that will threaten such a violation.



William S. Haigh
Field Manager, Folsom Field Office



Date



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EA Number: CA-180-08-69

Proposed Action: Darby Knob Fuel Break

Location: MDM, T 4 S, R 14 E, Section 36 and T 3 S, R 14 E, Section 1, Calaveras County, CA (see the project area map attached)

1.0 Purpose of and Need for Action

1.1 Need for Action

The Bureau of Land Management's Folsom Field Office (BLM) manages scattered public lands in the Stanislaus River canyon near New Melones Lake. Much of this area has not experienced wildfire in decades. Chaparral and other fuels have grown, increasing the possibility of a catastrophic wildfire. At the same time, local communities like Hathaway Pines, Red Apple, and Forest Meadows along the Highway 4 corridor have grown. There are now numerous private residences in the area, including adjacent to BLM-administered parcels containing dense fuels. Local residents are concerned about wildfire. The area is considered to be at the wildland-urban interface (WUI) and the local communities are considered "at risk." Some residents are anxious to see public land managers like BLM take action to reduce fuels on public lands. Fuel breaks are needed to help give firefighters places to hold wildfire or launch suppression efforts. The location of the proposed fuel break would serve as a strategic holding point in the event of human- or natural-caused wildfire originating within the Stanislaus River canyon and spreading northward toward communities like Forest Meadows.

1.2 Conformance with Applicable Land Use Plans

The proposed action is consistent with the Sierra Resource Management Plan, approved in February 2008, and the Folsom Field Office Fire Management Plan, approved in March 2008. The Sierra Resource Management Plan's Record of Decision (page 15-16) gives BLM the goal of establishing a cost-efficient fire management program commensurate with threats to life, property, public safety, and environmental resources. BLM also has the goal of suppressing wildfire to protect life, property, and environmental resources. BLM's objectives for meeting these goals are use mechanical and other kinds of treatments to reduce the risk of wildfire in WUI communities, reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire through fuels management. The Fire Management Plan gives BLM various non-fire fuels treatment objectives and strategies for specific lands under BLM's administration. Specific objectives and strategies for the fire management unit, in which the project area is located, are laid out in the plan.

2.0 Proposed Action and Alternatives

2.1 Proposed Action

The proposed action is to construct and maintain a shaded fuel break along an existing road on BLM-administered land on Darby Knob within the Stanislaus River canyon. The fuel break would be 2.0 miles long and 200 ft wide. The cleared area would be approximately 48 acres. It would be located on a historic fire break shown on USGS 7.5' quadrangle map dating to 1948. BLM would hire a

contractor to build and maintain the fuel break. Fuels would be treated using a large-scale mechanical masticator. A crew would cut fuels within the 200 ft wide area including brush and small trees (up to 6 inches in diameter). They would feed it into the masticator which would chew and chip it. All masticated and cut fuels would be dispersed throughout the project area. This layer of mulch would be less than 8 inches deep and would help to control erosion. All trees greater than 6 inches in diameter would be limbed up to a height of 8 ft or half the height of the tree, whichever is less. Portions of the fuel break inaccessible to the masticator may be built by hand using chainsaws and other hand tools. The fuel break would be maintained using the same methods described above every 5 to 7 years. Fencing, berms, cables, and large boulders may be used to prevent motorized vehicles from using the fuel break as a road.

2.2 Project Design Features

To minimize the potential for introduction or spread of invasive weeds, equipment used for the proposed action would be cleaned prior to entering area and, where possible, would avoid operating within weed-infested areas, such as stands of tree-of-heaven.

No equipment would traverse the road down from the top of Darby Knob (past the large water tank) to enter the project site. This road is infested with the State of California Class A weed, diffuse knapweed. The movement of seed of this species onto federal land would at best cause a substantial increase in costs and labor needed for the weed program at Folsom Field Office to eradicate a new population of a high priority weed species. At worst such seed movement could contribute to the widespread distribution of this species, with the potential to cause serious economic impacts in California.

Equipment use would not occur when soils are too wet to support equipment without soil deformation and soil compaction occurring. The readiness of the soil to support equipment will be judged by the BLM official overseeing the project, (e.g., project inspector). As a rule, if ruts in excess of 2 inches are created by equipment travel, soil conditions are too wet for operations to continue. Equipment operations would be discontinued until soils dry.

To avoid spreading seed, no chipping or mastication would be used to treat tree-of-heaven stems. And no tree of heaven stems would be moved away from the existing stand.

Cultural resource AC-108 would not be affected by having the masticator and work crews move over it back and forth to access the fuel break during project implementation and follow-up maintenance. However, the BLM archaeologist plans to flag the boundaries of AC-108 and work closely with the BLM fuels specialist Brian Mulhollen to have work crews tread lightly over the site or possibly avoid it entirely.

2.3 No Action

Under the no action alternative, BLM would not build and maintain a fuel break in the project area.

2.4 Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Analysis

BLM did not consider any other alternatives in detailed analysis.

3.0 Affected Environment

The project area and adjacent areas are on the steep south-facing slopes of the Stanislaus River canyon in the central Sierra Nevada. The area is dominated by a manzanita chaparral with an occasional gray pine. The chaparral provides habitat for a variety of wildlife. Deer and other herbivores make use of chaparral. Some small herbivores use chaparral species in fall and winter when grasses are not in

abundance. Rabbits and hares eat twigs, evergreen leaves and bark from chaparral. Chaparral provides seeds, fruits, insects, protection from predators and climate, as well as singing, roosting, and nesting sites for many birds. There are numerous private residences on the ridge tops above the project area. Recreational use of the project area is considered to be very low. Recreationists visit this area infrequently. BLM manages this area in accordance with class III visual resource management (VRM) standards. BLM's objective for class III is to partially retain the existing character of the landscape. The level of change to the characteristic landscape should be moderate. Management activities may attract attention but should not dominate the view of the casual observer. Changes should repeat basic elements found in the predominant natural features of the characteristic landscape.

4.0 Environmental Effects

The following critical elements have been considered in this environmental assessment, and unless specifically mentioned later in this EA, have been determined to be unaffected by the proposal: areas of critical environmental concern, prime/unique farmlands, floodplains, wetlands and riparian zones, wild and scenic rivers, wilderness, and environmental justice.

4.1 Impacts of the Proposed Action and Alternatives

The proposed action would not impact atmospheric, water, or soil resources. The area that would be treated is relatively small in size. Use of a large-scale masticator is expected to cause little soil disturbance. The masticator would be staged on the existing road. Masticated brush and other fuels would be dispersed throughout the project area. This layer of mulch would help prevent erosion. Vehicle barriers such as cables, berms, and large boulders may be placed at strategic locations to prevent dirt bikes and other off-highway vehicles from driving within the treated area and causing erosion problems. Cutting and mastication of fuels, as proposed, would create some dust, but not enough to affect air quality.

The BLM botanist conducted a botanical study of the project area. He conducted a field inventory in May 2008 when conditions were near optimal for plant identification within the project area. The study was designed to help BLM meet its obligations under the Endangered Species Act. He did not find any special status plants affected by the proposed action. The botanist recommended that the proposed action would not affect threatened and endangered plants or other BLM special status plants. Manzanita and other fuels that would be treated are commonplace and would grow back within a few years (refer to the study attached).

Maintenance involving repeated clearing at a short time interval (e.g., five years) has the potential to shift the species composition of the shrub layer in the fuelbreak. In the shrub layer sprouting species would be favored over those species that reproduce from seed, (e.g., white leaf manzanita). Among the species that reproduce from seed, those that begin reproduction at a younger age would be favored over those that begin reproduction later.

Because of effects to the overstory shrub layer, conditions at the level of the herb layer would change. More sunlight would reach the herb layer with the elimination of shrubs. The use of equipment for clearing would provide disturbance and create some bare ground. On the other hand mastication and chipping would create litter that would cover areas and prevent sunlight from reaching the soil surface. Many seeds have light dependent germination and species with such seeds would be less likely to germinate with increased litter.

Construction of the fuelbreak does alter ecosystem processes. However natural ecosystem processes have already been short-circuited by fire suppression. There is some controversy over whether fire

suppression has actually increased fire return intervals in chaparral ecosystems. Studies in southern California have indicated that fire return intervals have not increased for chaparral there.

Because of the linear design of the fuelbreak, habitat fragmentation would only be an issue if a species was completely excluded by fuelbreak conditions, and it had no way to travel the 200' to cross the fuelbreak. Clearly most pollen transport mechanisms can move pollen more than 200'. Some seed may not readily travel 200', but almost all seed would travel that far on occasion. Mature shrubs are more likely than herbs to be completely excluded from the fuelbreak, because shrubs generally take longer to reach reproductive age, and shrubs are more likely than herbs to be killed or set back by fuelbreak work. However seed of shrub species is sometimes contained in an edible fruit adapting it for animal transport. And many shrubs species can reach sexual maturity between fuelbreak maintenance intervals. Fragmentation of some plant species populations by such a fuelbreak could occur theoretically, but it seems a remote possibility.

Because none of the plant species in the fuelbreak are rare, and the effects of fuelbreak construction and maintenance on the immediate vicinity of the fuelbreak can be seen as a minor in relation to the overall ecosystem, vegetation effects are acceptable. (Widespread ecosystem effects are treated under cumulative impacts below.)

The BLM wildlife biologist analyzed the impacts of the project on wildlife, especially on special status wildlife. Her analysis was designed to help BLM meet its obligations under the Endangered Species Act. The biologist recommended that the project would have negligible short-term impacts on wildlife due to temporary noise and dust when fuels are cut and masticated. There would be no impacts on threatened and endangered wildlife or other BLM special status wildlife.

The BLM archaeologist conducted a cultural resource study of the project area. The study included background records search, field inventory, and Native American consultation. The study was designed to help BLM meet its obligations under Section 106 of the Historic Preservation Act. The BLM archaeologist found one cultural resource (identified as AC-108) within the project area. The boundaries of this resource would be flagged prior to project implementation so that project personnel would avoid it. No places of Native American religious and cultural significance were identified (refer to the Section 106-compliance study attached).

The proposed action would have no impacts on recreational use. The project area is located within the Stanislaus River canyon and has outstanding views of the river. The project is part of the canyon's viewshed. The proposed project would have a negligible impact on visual resources. The proposed fuel break already exists to some extent. A transmission line is located on part of it. In fact, it is the location of a historic fuel break. Additional vegetation would be removed. Hydroelectric developments at nearby Clark Flat already mar the scenic beauty of a river canyon. BLM has given this area a VRM class III status, and the proposed action is in line with the management objective for this class, which is to partially retain the existing character of the landscape.

4.2 Impacts of the No Action Alternative

There would be no impacts to environmental resources, such as water, soils, and wildlife. There could be impacts to firefighting efforts. If a wildfire occurred, firefighters would not have this strategic fuel break to stop the advance of the fire and attack the fire. The result could be a larger wildfire that impacts environmental resources well beyond the project area. There may also be impacts to private property.

4.3 Cumulative Impacts

The proposed action would not cause negative cumulative impacts to significant biological and cultural resources. The proposed action would not cause negative cumulative impacts to atmospheric, water, and soil resources.

The proposed action is expected to have beneficial cumulative impact on wildfire suppression in the area as long as BLM maintains the fuel break. If fire suppression becomes more effective as this fuel break contributes to a system of fuel breaks being constructed in the watershed, then the average size of wildfires will be reduced, and the average age of stands of vegetation will increase. If successful, a cumulative effect of fuel breaks will be to edge the ecosystem toward a slightly later successional stage. By limiting the growth of a wildfire, the cumulative effect of a system of fuel breaks can be to prevent a natural ecosystem process, (like fire stimulated germination of the seed of fire adapted species), from reaching portions of the landscape. Another cumulative effect of fuel breaks can be to provide for local stand-age diversity by maintaining burned and unburned plant communities in close proximity.

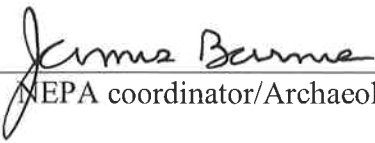
5.0 Agencies and Persons Consulted

No outside agencies were consulted.

5.1 Authors

James Barnes, BLM NEPA coordinator/Archaeologist
Brian Mulhollan, BLM Fuels specialist

5.2 BLM Interdisciplinary Team/Reviewers:

 11/3/08
NEPA coordinator/Archaeologist Date

 11/3/08
Fuels specialist Date

 10/31/08
Recreation Date

 10/31/08
Botany Date

 10/31/08
Wildlife/fisheries Date

5.3 Availability of Document and Comment Procedures

This EA will be posted on Folsom Field Office's website (www.blm.gov/ca/folsom) under NEPA and will be available for a 15-day public review period. The EA is also available by mail upon request during this 15-day public review period. Comments should be sent to James Barnes at Bureau of Land Management, Folsom Field Office, 63 Natoma Street, Folsom, CA 95630, or emailed to James_Barnes@ca.blm.gov.

**Bureau of Land Management
Bakersfield District
Folsom Resource Area**

Botanical Resource Inventory Report

Project name: Darby Knob Fuelbreak

Project description: Construct and maintain a 200' wide fuelbreak from Darby Knob down toward the Stanislaus River in Calaveras County. Only the mid-portion of the ridge is on public land.

Size of disturbance: 16 acres on BLM public land; 0.66 linear miles.

Project location: T. 4N, R. 14E, S1/2 of section 36; T. 3N, R. 14E, NE1/4 of NE1/4 of section 1.

USGS Quads: Murphy's

County: Calaveras

Geographic area: Sierra foothills

Elevation range: 2000'-3000'

Geology/soils: Paleozoic metasedimentary rocks

Land form: Ridgetop and side slope

Plant community/vegetation: Mixed chaparral dominated by chamise and white leaf manzanita, with buckbrush, yerba santa, toyon, poison oak, keckiella, golden yarrow, silver lupine, deer weed, golden fleece, gray pine, ponderosa pine, interior live oak, black oak, blue oak.

CNDDDB records: *Horkelia parryi*, *Mimulus pulchellus* and *Mimulus whipplei* are all reported for the Murphys Quad. There is no appropriate habitat for either monkeyflower species at the project site.

Inventory description (methodology, problems, reliability, coverage): The ridgetop road fuelbreak was walked, and some lateral trips into the brush away from the central cleared area were made. The center of the proposed fuelbreak was viewed, but the edges were only seen in part.

Sensitive species particularly searched for: Red Hills soaproot, Parry's horkelia.

Sensitive species or other botanical resources at site: None found.

Weeds at site: Tocalote, yellow starthistle, Chinese tree-of-heaven.

Project impacts: None to special status species.

Recommendations: The presence of diffuse knapweed on the road from the knob to the fuelbreak presents a threat to the public land below, especially during a project that involves the movement of equipment. If it can be avoided NO EQUIPMENT SHOULD TRANSIT PAST THE DIFFUSE KNAPWEED SITE ON THE ROAD DOWN FROM THE KNOB. An alternative route should be used if at all possible. Diffuse knapweed is a Class A weed. The state of California has a goal of complete eradication of this species. Calaveras County is working to eradicate this particular population. The spread of such a Class A weed would be a serious blow to this goal. It would also cause a substantial additional workload for BLM to eradicate the weed on our land.

Likewise tree-of-heaven seed should not be moved from the single location where it occurs in the project area. Mastication could throw persistent seed retained on trees long distances. Because the extent of tree-of-heaven is small, manually clearing this area would be quite practical. This would be the preferred approach.

Another riskier approach for tree-of-heaven would be seasonal timing of the project. Because tree-

of-heaven does not produce a persistent seed bank-----the seeds are not viable after the first year-----
-if equipment work occurs in the latter part of spring, the likelihood of viable seedlings getting
started in new areas is greatly reduced.

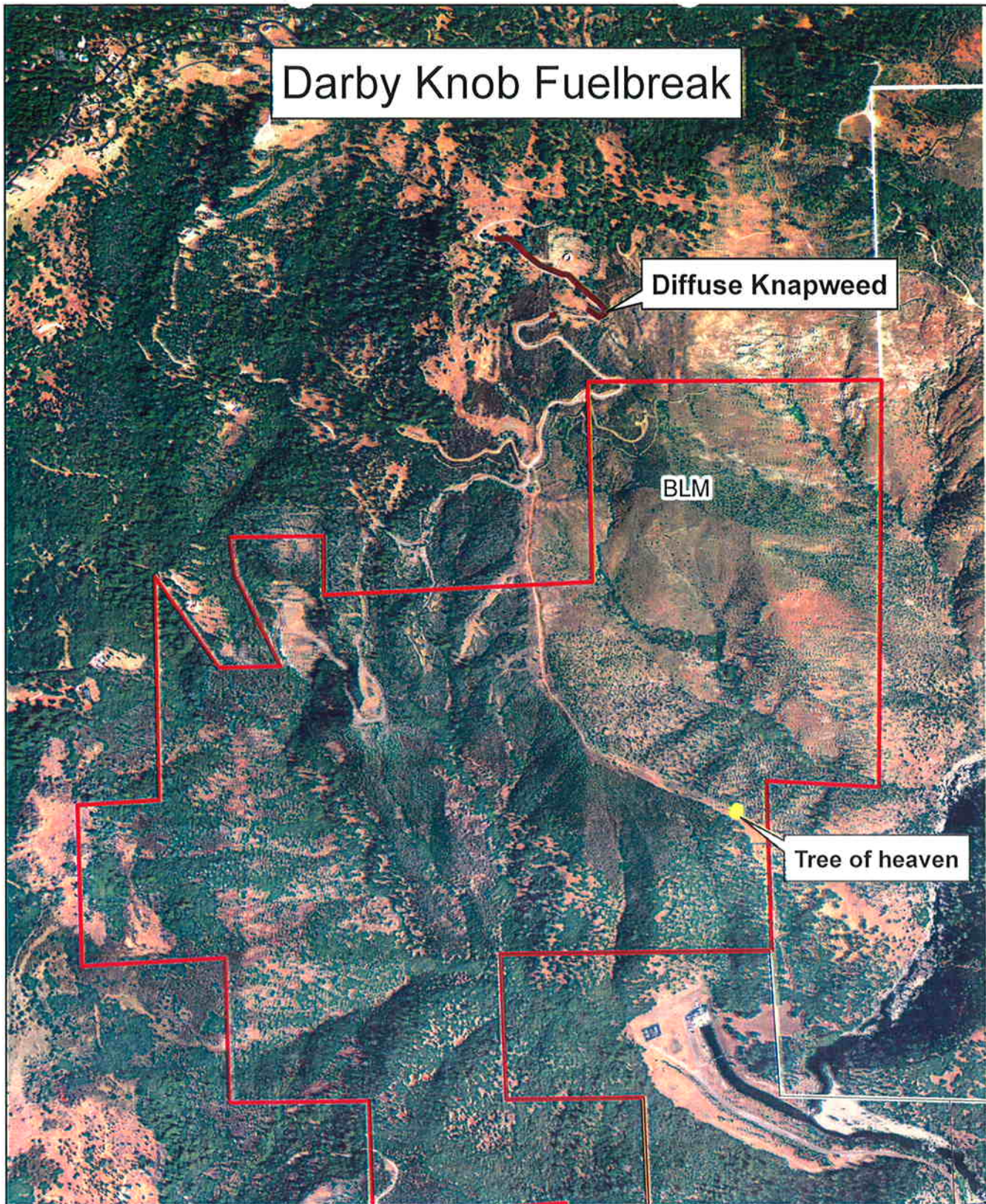
Date of inventory: 4/28/08

Date of report: 9/17/08

Signature:

Albert Frankin

Title: Botanist



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